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UNITING OCTAVE AND SESTET:
COMPLETING 'THE CYCLE' OF MCKAY'S SEQUENCE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Cocoa Michelle Williams
August 2008

Accepted by:
Dr. Susanna Ashton, Committee Chair
Dr. Catherine Paul
Dr. Elizabeth Rivlin

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Claude McKay's *The Cycle* (c. 1943) in relationship to how McKay's other sonnets have been received by scholars and the ways in which this collection speaks to fallacies concerning didactic art, African American views on the British literary tradition, and the literary merit of McKay's later poetry post Catholic conversion. Much of the criticism on McKay's other sonnets deals primarily with the question of whether the sonnet form is an appropriate vehicle for such mutinous and didactic commentary. Critics tend to answer this question in one of two ways. Some assert that because the relationship between form and content is so strained, McKay's sonnets then become a space of political protest, using the dominant culture's most revered verse form against them, which oversimplifies his choice. Others would simply write-off the decision as poor artistic judgment on McKay's part, noting the restrictive nature of the sonnet and suggesting that a "freer" verse form would have been more effective in relaying his messages of political and social frustration. Few critics delve into the ways in which his sonnets maintain what scholars call "sonnetness" and draw from a long-standing sonnet tradition. Using *The Cycle* (c. 1943) as the primary text of investigation, I have used historical and theoretical approaches to the sonnet individually and a sonnet sequence collectively to demonstrate McKay's commitments to the integrity of the sonnet form. McKay adopts Petrarch as his model for sequence writing. In undertaking a lyric sonnet sequence, McKay is able to address the fallacies that have marred his poetic career up until this point, also anticipating future criticisms about his religious conversion. McKay makes explicit statements against the idea that his

conversion has been the source of a diminished spirit. McKay's decision to use the lyric sonnet sequence, in what proved to be the only fully realized sequence written by the poet, invites readers of his poetry to see a developing cycle marked by his poetic career that is unique and separate from his career as a novelist. If poetry gives us the greatest insight into the artist himself, McKay, through the authority of the narrating *I* tells his readers exactly what bearing his experiences have on his poetry.

DEDICATION

To my mother and father, who believed since I was a child that I could do anything and who have spent their lives convincing me of it.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

. . . Claude McKay, who has often been referred to as the pioneer of the so-called Negro Renaissance¹

Claude McKay's position as a seminal figure of the Harlem Renaissance is secured. Many critics use the publication of his sonnet "If We Must Die" in 1919 as the starting point of the Harlem Renaissance itself. Born in Jamaica in 1890, McKay moved to the US in 1912, after already publishing two volumes of Jamaican dialect poetry. After short stints at Tuskegee Institute and Kansas State University, McKay lived the busy and thankless life of a magazine editor and poet, working the longest at the *Liberator*. However, while a part of the Harlem literary scene, McKay was decidedly removed from it, especially from his black compatriots. He was removed from them both politically and aesthetically, as McKay didn't embrace the modernist and futurist movements of the time, and his political associations with communists and socialists made blacks wary of him. McKay published a great deal of poetry, including *Harlem Shadows* (1922) before his travels abroad. During his expatriate years (1922-1934), the prominent years of the Harlem Renaissance, McKay traveled to Moscow, Marseilles, and Morocco and completed four novels (Home to Harlem, Banjo, Gingertown, and Banana Bottom). McKay novels were embraced with much chiding criticism, as did a great deal of his poetry.

¹ Quotation comes from a circulation letter entitled "For a Negro Magazine" McKay wrote as promotional material to get public and financial support for a magazine he would edit that would highlight Negro talent. Promotion was included in "Letter to Max Eastman," 11 September 1934. Cooper 202.

Nevertheless, McKay recognized early on his influence on the period. However, he approaches his influence on the movement cautiously. There is a tone of hesitation in the epigraph that introduces this chapter. This uneasiness is felt by critics and readers of McKay alike. In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in both his poetry and prose, placing McKay both inside and outside the Harlem Renaissance and the modernist aesthetics of the time. This desire to place McKay in many ways works against the overarching narrative of his work, especially his poetry. McKay, himself, feels the need to explore and clarify his public, private, and poetic personas. He simultaneously does this in many of his poems, in which he re-visits in later poems sentiments expressed in earlier poems.

McKay begins to experiment with the idea of revisitations in *The Years Between* (1925-1934). His “America in Retrospect” (1926) is not only biographically significant but also directly addresses his previous relationship with the country in “America” (1921). “Retrospect” in the title serves two purposes. It both marks his exile from the country and alludes to the reminiscent tone of the new poem in relation to the previous one. While the youthful speaker in “America” stands “erect against her hate,” the mature speaker in “America in Retrospect” says that his “thoughts of . . . [America] are memories of a child, / A healthy child that soon forgets its hurt” (“America” 6; “America in Retrospect” 5-6). The speaker’s use of the word “healthy” implies that he could in fact retain those previous sentiments, but he has instead embraced a “stoic” disposition, accepting his hardships gracefully (“America in Retrospect” 8). However, the militant spirit expressed in “America” is still present in “America in Retrospect.” Like the

speaker in “America,” this speaker also waits for time, but time is not a corrective for America herself, it only insures that the speaker will have the opportunity to write “in freedom and in peace / The accumulations of the years that burn, / White forge-like fires within . . . [his] haunted brain” (12-14).

The title poem of this collection, “The Years Between” (1934), represents McKay’s philosophy on the development of his own poetry:

I have returned, but you will never find,
All the familiar things of me intact,
I am like a classic that a modern mind
Has cut and altered to improve the act. (1-4)

As in “America in Retrospect,” this poem also has biographical implications that McKay couples with aesthetic implications. McKay lets his critics and readers know that he, like W.B. Yeats, one of several Irish poets McKay shared a kinship with, is extremely interested in cycles, as they relate to the poet’s mind and his art.² The second stanza of this poem foreshadows the sonnet sequence McKay would begin writing nine years later. The speaker’s “passions agitate” (5). However, this cylindrical movement, like the historical gyres that Yeats defines, allows for the creation of new and different ideas, though always attached to the past: “The years between have done their cyclic part— / The streams new courses found after the flood” (7-8). Then he directly addresses his critics’ presumption that the poet is in some way immune to this natural change, while the

² See Lee M. Jenkins’ ““Black Murphy”: Claude McKay and Ireland” IUR 33.2 (2003): 279-290.

world around him changes. The poet's most profound message to his critics occurs in the third stanza:

This mood that seems to you so passing strange,
This that you wrongly call a cynic smile,
Is nothing but a sequence of sea-change—
I have been running round a little while. (9-12)

McKay, anticipating criticism, prepares his readers for a bend in an ongoing cycle that he has been “running round” (12). McKay delivers on that promise and, as many scholars of his poetry agree, there is something different about his later poetry. However, it is not different because McKay did not have the mental fortitude to stay the same but because he had the mental fortitude to change. The greatest testament to that “sea-change” is one of McKay's final poetic endeavors, *The Cycle* (c. 1943), a lyric sonnet sequence, which explores universal questions about life through the lens of his own.

McKay discusses the past twenty years of racial strife, travel to foreign countries and the everyday experiences of being a black writer in America, all within the borders of the sonnet.³ The sonnet and the sonnet sequence were created at the same time in Southern Italy in 1235 C.E. The sequence itself started as “two, three, and more, [sonnets] and these tenzoni, as they are called are the first sonnets in sequence . . .” (2). This collection contains fifty-four poems, four of which are not sonnets but belong, nevertheless, in the traditional sonnet sequence. These cycle poems (composed of four-line stanzas) formally represent songs that have been a common device in sonnet

³ Other Black poets writing sonnets during this period include Countee Cullen and Gwendolyn Bennett.

sequences. These poems and his *Final Catholic Poetry* (1945-1947)⁴ add an important dynamic to the narrative that his earlier poetry began. Like Guittone d' Arezzo, McKay's use of the sonnet form in *The Cycle* (c. 1943) has taken on a "new deliberateness" during his initiation into the Catholic faith (Spiller, The Development 21). The form is not an empty shell into which McKay cast his defiant themes; instead, the rhetorical structure of the form helps create additional meaning that contributes to our understanding of those themes. A sonnet by definition promises to return to themes introduced throughout the sequence at other points during its duration, which helps to hold the sequence together. McKay's sequence also adopts this device. However, the themes that McKay returns to are in the entire body of his poetry, as well as the sequence itself. Therefore, this work is not simply a restatement but an exploration of the same themes at a different point in the poetic continuum. I hope to isolate this point in the continuum in order to offer a full understanding of where McKay had been, where he was at present, and where he logically continued to go in his subsequent writings.

The Cycle (c. 1943) has received similar criticism from McKay's contemporaries and many of today's scholars. Critics of the work have dismissed it for three primary reasons: too personal, pointing to the autobiographical nature of the work, too didactic, commenting on the poet's diction, and too religious, implying that McKay's new religious sentiments have in effect made this and his other later poetry largely disappointing. Assessing why the collection has received this negative criticism will help clarify the need to challenge some of those assumptions.

⁴ Maxwell's designation.

McKay's personal letters to his longtime editor and friend, Max Eastman, which comment on *The Cycle* (c. 1943) give us insight into how McKay, as well as his contemporaries, viewed the work. The most valuable of McKay's discussions of the project may be the rejections that he received from Harper and Dutton. In a letter to Eastman on November 28, 1944, McKay asks Eastman if he knows of any "radical" publishers that "might take a try at . . . [his] poems" (Cooper 306). He goes on to explain that both Harper and Dutton passed on the poems, one saying they were "too personal" and the other declaring that they were not poetry at all (306). McKay, however, actually finds comfort in these criticisms, using their reproof as an indication of something forceful and poignant in his work, suggesting a conscious agenda on McKay's part that has not been fully explored.

McKay's tumultuous relationship with his many critics proved to be a driving force behind his artistic genius. McKay states, in a letter to Eastman, "I know perfectly well the kind of criticism and stimulation I need to work well" (197). When writing about his childhood, McKay remembers challenging the assumptions of critics who said that his dialect poetry was good, but that he was not a real poet: "Someday, I would write poetry in straight English and amaze and confound them" (McKay, "Boyhood in Jamaica" 142). This "adolescent vow" reemerges throughout McKay's poetic career; he spends an exhaustive amount of professional energy addressing his critics (Condit 359). In *The Cycle* (c. 1943), McKay strips the critic of all his powers, assuming the role of critic himself. This ultimate rebuttal to his critics proves effective because of the

dominating presence of the narrating *I*, who is in control of poesis and criticism in the past, present, and future.

We are able to see some of this self-criticism emerge outside the context of *The Cycle* (c. 1943) itself when McKay readdresses the criticisms from Harper and Dutton. McKay admits that the cycle poems are different than his “old style,” which McKay characterizes as being influenced by Shelley, Keats, and the Elizabethans (Cooper 309). His new style he fittingly describes as being comparable to Pope, Swift, and Catullus (309). However, we must be careful not to over-exaggerate the distinctions that McKay himself makes. There is, in fact, a great deal of the old romantic style present in his attentiveness to the lyric voice in all its temporal forms. McKay balances his romantic sensibilities—that are present in his treatment of transcendence and retribution—with literary witticism that characterizes the work of Pope, Swift, and Catullus. In analyzing the same admission by McKay, Barbara Griffin, author of “The Last Word: Claude McKay’s Unpublished ‘Cycle Manuscript,’” positions herself among McKay’s contemporaries in her evaluation of the work. She states that McKay’s new poetic persona has, in effect, compromised his ability to “deftly balance lyricism and polemics” (41). While Griffin is correct in her evaluation of the central artistic conflict of *The Cycle* (c. 1943), her suggestion that these poems represent a decline of McKay’s ability to match wit with technical skill does not consider the ways in which *The Cycle* (c. 1943) fits into the entire body of McKay’s poetry. This criticism also does not give McKay full consideration as “a conscious poetic craftsman” (Condit 363). As noted in John Hillyer Condit’s article, “An Urge Toward Wholeness: Claude McKay and His Sonnets,” McKay

was extremely agitated with Alain Locke for changing the name of his poem “The White House” to “White Houses” when Locke printed it the *Survey Graphic*. He states, “That is a symbolic title. When you change it to ‘White Houses,’ the poem immediately becomes cheap, flat Afro-American propaganda” (Cooper 143). This is one of many examples that prove McKay remained ever cognizant of his decisions as a poet. For McKay, propaganda had as much to do with the unauthorized appropriation of the artist’s work for social and political purposes as it had to do with the message itself.

Wayne Cooper, McKay’s primary biographer, has focused on the connections this very didactic cycle of sonnets have to McKay’s self-proclaimed, “hectic life” (305). In his introduction to The Passion of Claude McKay, Cooper quotes from the sestet of “36” in order to confirm McKay’s thoughts on American imperialism. Mention of the poem as a part of *The Cycle* (c. 1943) is relegated to the endnotes, and the work is described as primarily a restatement of ideas McKay more skillfully addresses in his magazine articles (325). Griffin’s article, the only article to date that takes the cycle as its primary subject, discusses how the cycle of sonnets is a “testament to McKay’s old intellectual past” (43). While the overall content of *The Cycle* (c. 1943) seems to call for a primarily biographical approach, the poems offer more than what we already know of McKay, as the poet himself will clarify his commitments to various social and political issues both in the black community and abroad.

Therefore, these sonnets represent a maturation of McKay’s socio-political agenda that is balanced with an equally fierce spiritual exploration. McKay’s turn to Catholicism may be seen by some as his last desperate act to find a group to which to

belong or in the worst case, as it relates to how we interpret *The Cycle* (c. 1943), McKay's "last link to self respect and dignity" (Griffin 42). Putting aside, for the moment, any conjectures or evaluations of McKay's motives for joining the Catholic Church, we must first assess, as does McKay, the anti-Christian bias that trends throughout the beginning of the twentieth century among artists and social commentators alike.

With many in the literary sub-culture drawn to the promise and idealism of Marxist and Communist theories, during the years between the world wars, declining in popularity in the U.S. after WWII, McKay seems to have committed professional suicide by converting to Catholicism. McKay, in effect, gives his critics an opportunity to judge his work based on the prejudice that religion in some way ruins the artist. However, McKay describes his conversion as an effort not to "go sour on humanity," developing a spiritual connectedness with the outside world, regardless of the physical acceptance of the world itself (Cooper 311). It must be noted, that in taking a judicious look at these criticisms, I am not precluding myself from offering critiques on the work's artistic value. However, an extensive examination of these criticisms is deemed necessary because the existing scholarship on the work does not take into account how McKay's use of the sonnet adds to our understanding of his developing spiritual consciousness and therefore, marks a continued maturation of his aesthetics and socio-political agenda.

Specifically and technically addressing the sonnet form, which McKay commits himself to throughout his American poetic career, which becomes his exclusive mode of expression in his final years, will prove to be a promising endeavor. Playing on some of

the sonnet form's most subtle but highly regarded conventions works to strengthen what many argue threatens didactic art. Richard Lederer explains: "The weakness that threatens didactic art is that if the sole purpose of the work is to embody its thesis, a fleshless, bloodless skeleton may well be the result" (219). McKay challenges this assumption, creating "other" meaning within the close confines of a form and lyric voice that appear to say nothing more than what is presented on the page.

In William Maxwell's introduction to Complete Poems, he calls for a reevaluation of McKay's entire body of poetry, pointing out that "professional readers of McKay's poetry have . . . exaggerated the severity of the clash between his mutinous themes and his well-groomed sonnets" (xxxix). Instead of his poetry representing "a blood match between content and form," it chronicles "the struggle to produce a faithful lyric poetry of modern cataclysm" (xxxix). Building upon Maxwell's interest in genre, I believe that it is equally important in discussing this particular set of poems to fully investigate the work as McKay explicitly wanted it to be read, and the way in which the poems themselves urge us to read them, as a sonnet cycle—"an innovation important enough to trumpet in the collection's title" (368). Maxwell further emphasizes the importance of analyzing *The Cycle* (c. 1943) as a unified work because these poems represent the poet's attempt at a "full-fledged" sonnet cycle, which is an "unprecedented" enterprise in McKay's career (368).

In evaluating the content itself, we notice that McKay has added another layer to an already strained psychological conflict. Griffin notes the presence of what W.E.B. Du Bois coins double-consciousness in these poems, but there is another equally problematic

consciousness that is reconciled throughout the work—that of religious fortitude in the face of worldly strife. In McKay's October 16, 1944 letter to Max Eastman, he addresses Eastman's disappointment about his conversion and then defends his decision. McKay explains that he has recently taken the sacrament of baptism, and then lays out a rebuttal based on Eastman's assertion that McKay has risked his understanding of truth and "mental integrity" because of his commitment to the church (qtd. in Cooper 305). McKay summarizes relative truth: "The Orient has one standard of 'truth and mental integrity' and the Occident another, the German have theirs, the English theirs, the Japanese have theirs, the Americans theirs and each one thinks that his way is the right way" (305). By demonstrating the presence of relative truth in various of the world's nations, McKay defends his own personal interpretation of truth that operates independently from Eastman's understanding of it. Then directly defending himself as an artist and obstinate political agitator, he states, "I am not the less a fighter" (305). This statement further points to McKay's cognizance of the difficulty he faced in writing *The Cycle* (c. 1943) during and shortly after his conversion, reevaluating his political commitments over the previous twenty years with renewed fervor and balancing this with a religious and social agenda.

Tracing how deftly McKay is able to unify what seem to be contradictory aims opens up new and interesting critical interpretations of the work's images and themes. McKay's sonnets have received an exhaustive amount of poignant criticism pertaining to his public and private persona. Pairing the discussion of *The Cycle*'s (c. 1943) historical and cultural significance with an in-depth inquiry into the text helps us evaluate these

poems not only as historical artifacts but also as art. As Maxwell eloquently warns, “To cast the resulting theater [“the short twentieth century”] as a common divorce of form and content is to mistake the central undertaking and overarching narrative of McKay’s poetry and to badly mistake the capacity for historical responsibility . . .” (xl). This pairing also prompts a psychological approach to the work. *The Cycle* (c. 1943) can be read as a personal theological work in progress that leads up to his *Final Catholic Poetry* (1945-1947). “The Pagan Isms” (1945), revisits the themes introduced in the title poem of *The Cycle* (c. 1943) and then reevaluates those sentiments, which fulfills the promise of McKay’s forceful statement on artistic autonomy in the sestet of “The Cycle” (1943): “But tomorrow I may sing another tune” (9). In exploring how and why this work has been compartmentalized and opening up the scope of our reading, I hope to offer an analysis of the sonnet cycle’s form, in conjunction with its themes, that will provide a critical approach to this work that properly situates McKay’s sequence in the larger narrative of McKay’s work and in the context of a rich sonnet tradition. This will prompt scholars, as Maxwell suggests, to re-evaluate their readings of McKay’s later, as well as earlier, poetry insuring that these aesthetically and thematically complex works receive diverse and comprehensive critical assessments.

CHAPTER TWO

EXISTING CRITICISM ON CONTENT AND FORM

*I have started to write poetry again (very different from my earlier stuff).*⁵

The sonnets in *The Cycle* (c. 1943), when looked at solitarily seems to be a departure from McKay's seminal sonnets of the era, particularly his very defiant and often anthologized "If We Must Die," which is thematically removed from the reflective and sometimes religiously apologetic ethos of *The Cycle* (c. 1943). McKay himself anticipates the critical backlash he will receive because of these poems divergence from his seminal sonnets. Critics of McKay's sonnets, in general, try to make sense of how content and form either work together or against each other both functionally and aesthetically. This paradox is the central critical dilemma that readers of McKay have been exploring since his first American sonnet was published in 1919. Understanding the relationship between form and content becomes even more important in *The Cycle* (c. 1943) because McKay, in discussing poesis explicitly throughout the sequence, points to the importance of the sonnet as a rhetorical device. Focusing my inquiry into this paradox on scholarship of McKay's previously published sonnets provides important critical context for his response in *The Cycle* (c. 1943) to his critics' assessment of how form and content operate in his poetry. Therefore, in *The Cycle* (c. 1943) McKay is interested in the form theoretically as well as functionally.

⁵ "To Max Eastman," 3 Sept 1943. Cooper 304.

As mentioned above, McKay's sonnets have received diverse criticisms that are represented by three distinct critical positions, two positions representing polar opposites and the other occupying a conflicted space in between. The first group of critics either argues that McKay's use of the sonnet form becomes obsolete when coupled with his revolutionary and oftentimes didactic commentary or that his use of the sonnet form is an act of vigilantism. The second position, however, grants McKay more credit as a poetic craftsman and recognizes a unity present between content and form. This school of criticism moves beyond the most basic assertion that McKay is holding the sonnet form hostage in political protest. The third position is characterized by a mixture of the previous two criticisms in varying degrees. The ultimate conclusion that critics in this camp usually make is that a definitive answer cannot be reached about McKay's use of the sonnet form in conjunction with its subject matter.

Richard Lederer's article, "The Didactic and the Literary in Four Harlem Renaissance Sonnets," is representative of much of the criticism on McKay's sonnets that would follow in the decades after the article's 1973 publication, as it deals with the overarching question of all criticism concerning McKay's sonnets—whether there is literary merit in didactic art. Lederer's agenda is to demonstrate that there is a drastic disconnect between the didactic and the literary. In making these two separate, Lederer devalues the historical sustenance of McKay's sonnets, as well as his proficiency as a sonneteer. While he does give McKay some passing praise in his assessment of "If We Must Die" (1919) and "The White House," (1922) he notes that these poems pale in comparison to Countee Cullen's "Yet Do I Marvel" (1925) and "From the Dark Tower"

(1924), which he characterizes as literary art. While Lederer defends his position by noting the distinct differences between the two arts, there are many questions that can be raised about the subjectivity of the requirements that Lederer lays out for each. He states, “The first, [didactic art] gives the impression that its purpose precedes its process, that an initial contention has been embodied in concrete terms” (Lederer 219). On the other hand, “[l]iterary art attempts to reflect faithfully the complexities of life as it is actually experienced” (219).

Lederer’s definition of didactic art, as it relates to McKay’s sonnets, does not carefully consider why McKay chose the sonnet form if there was a more appropriate vehicle for his poem. This points to many critics’ assumption that proscribed forms are artistically restrictive. As will be introduced in other dissenting criticism on the same topic, this oversight does not give McKay any credit as a conscious poetic craftsman. Lederer adds insult to injury by making an even more egregious error in his assessment of McKay’s use of the sonnet form. He implies that McKay’s use of the form was one of many examples of the poet as the “strident propagandist” (Braithwaite 79). This critique not only disregards the historical context in which McKay is writing but also threatens to devalue McKay’s preoccupation with truth and sincerity in his works. Lastly, it overlooks what McKay, himself, characterizes as the driving force behind both his social and political critiques, a “fierce hatred of injustice” (McKay, Preface 7). Lederer attributes this propagandist view in “If We Must Die” to McKay’s use of “Britishisms.” While Lederer does not clarify what McKay’s use of traditional British syntax has to do with propaganda, we can assume that Lederer believes that McKay is being insincere in

his choice of vernacular speech in order to make a bigger point about the myth of racial superiority. Anticipating criticisms of said assessment, Lederer grants that some of this “stiffness of syntax” has to do with McKay’s Jamaican upbringing (221). However, he retracts this statement by pointing out an instance in which McKay departs from that syntax in “The White House,” implying that McKay should have no other choice than to follow the same syntactic formula of the previous poem. It is a critical judgment that deprives McKay of any artistic autonomy.

The last criticism that Lederer offers is that McKay’s two sonnets are devoid of any real imagery and therefore lacking in context. However, even Lederer agrees that in “If We Must Die” “sound certainly echoes sense” (221). In this particular poem, McKay’s purpose is in fact sound not image. Beginning with the oratory tone of the opening line, continuing with the bark of his oppressors, and concluding with several exclamatory statements, McKay uses the stressed syllables of the iambs for impact, coupling words that are traditionally stressed with words that are associated with intense emotion. He also deems it appropriate to deviate from those iambs for additional emotional, sound impact: “*Ánd f3r | th3ir th3u | s3nd bl3ws | d3al 3ne | d3ath-bl3w*” (McKay, “If We Must Die” 11). If we compare lines 5-9 of “The White House” to the same lines in Cullen’s “Yet Do I Marvel,” we notice that both poets are attempting to create a stark visual representation of their stinging hurt and dejection:

A chaving savage, down the decent street;
And passion rends my vitals as I pass,
Where boldly shines your shuttered door of glass

Oh, I must search for wisdom every hour,

(“The White House” 6-9).

Is baited by the fickle fruit, declare

If merely brute caprice dooms Sisyphus

To struggle up a never-ending stair.

Inscrutable His ways are, and immune”

(“Yet Do I Marvel” 6-9)

In “The White House,” the juxtaposition of the barefoot “chafing savage” to the “shuttered door of glass” is effective both visually and emotionally (6). Conversely, Cullen draws upon Greek mythology to express those same sentiments. While these allusions place the struggle of the Black artisan in a larger literary context, the distance these allusions have to the real experience of being shutout and tormented may not satisfy some readers. However, both meet the criteria that Lederer sets up to explain literary art in the opening of his essay. Both seek to “reflect faithfully the complexities of life as it is actually experienced” (Lederer 219). Even McKay’s sonnets, although void of any “aesthetic frills” (as Lederer asserts), meet the second criteria he poses for literary art—that meaning can also be latent in the process (221).

In conclusion, Lederer states,

Claude McKay has heated his poems at the fires of his convictions. But when he has finished, his works have cooled because they seem so removed from their source. Having examined the two didactic sonnets we

have chosen, what do we know of the man? Very little: we sense him only as an abstract embodiment of the pride and anger of his race. (223)

This is all too simplistic of a summation of these poems and McKay as a poet in general. There is a close connection between the poet and reader, which McKay makes explicit in his poetry, especially in *The Cycle* (c. 1943). Following the aesthetic principles of the Romantics, McKay gives everything he has to his reader using the language of “real men.” However little we may know of the man, we do know of him is presented frankly and without pause. Lederer does not hold Cullen to the same standard. What we do know about Cullen may or may not be a true representation of the man himself. With McKay, there is no way to mistake his commanding spirit.

Other critics would make the same claims about McKay’s didacticism in the following decades, pointing to how his content is at odds with the form itself. Gretna J. LeSeur notes in her 1989 article that “McKay felt a great tension between black content and traditional white form, and this, for him, was perhaps the hardest problem to solve” (299). LeSeur adds, “The problem became a personal one of how to keep his allegiance to British models—whose poetry he truly felt and knew well— and be a black poet emotionally” (299). Contemporary critics later vehemently reject this assertion. While this observation seems logical, the fact that McKay felt so comfortable with the sonnet form, using it as his primary vehicle of poetic expression, seems to contradict this notion. In fact, McKay believed that poetry has a universal quality “independent of race and nationality” (Ramesh 69). Therefore, it can be a viable tool of expression for any group despite rigid cultural designations.

Additionally, LeSeur notes that “McKay thinks the traditional should work best on lawless and revolutionary passions and words, so as to give the feeling of the highest degree of spontaneity and freedom” (298). The perception that tradition hinders the artist’s ability to express himself without restraint does not seem to be a paradox for McKay. He discusses the two as if they were perfectly complimentary. Although LeSeur’s agenda in her article, “Claude McKay’s Romanticism,” is to track McKay’s commitments to romantic aesthetics, her conclusion about the tension of form and content is important to note, as it adds to the mysticism associated with (as LeSeur says), “a black man writing in the mode of the romantics, using their themes, subject matter, and meter” (307). This type of assessment only deepens the need to investigate questions of appropriateness and novelty when discussing the body of McKay’s sonnets.

James R. Keller begins such an inquiry in his 1994 article, “‘A Chafing Savage Down the Decent Street’: The Politics of Compromise in Claude McKay’s Protest Sonnets.” In his article, he uses the protest model as the source of the conflict between content and form. Like LeSeur, the foundation of Keller’s argument is based on the oddity of a Black man using the sonnet form, which inadvertently works to reinforce notions of race superiority. LeSeur and Keller would argue that this is a valid point because McKay sets out to make a bold declaration against the aesthetics of the establishment. While he did want to show his critics that he could use traditional form just as aptly as his literary predecessors, he was completely committed to maintaining the integrity of the function and history of the form. Keller also recognizes the functionality of the form with content, but only insofar as the form “create[s] a space in which to

challenge white America's claim to cultural superiority" (448). The problem with this assertion is that it marginalizes the importance of the form as it relates to how we understand the interplay between form and content that resonates in all fourteen lines. Simply discussing form as a blanket expression of political dissent and not carefully looking at the form in action with those dissenting ideas does not give full depth and appreciation to the intricacies of his choice.

Keller also gives little credit to what he calls the "accident of McKay's education" (451). However, understanding his education helps enhance our evaluation of whether most critics are correct in "conclud[ing] that the practice is a flaw . . . 'which weakens [his poems] success'" (450). While Keller goes into great detail about the content of a few selected poems and the poems' inherent claims about moral, spiritual, and cultural superiority, he doesn't intensively delve into the ways the sonnet helps to enhance these ideas structurally. However, this is not to say that he does not address it at all. Keller shows some interest in this other layer of meaning when he states, "Despite the often debilitating effects of self-consuming anger, the poet has managed to control the chaotic passion by containing it within the boundaries of the strict sonnet form. Thus the poem suggests the formation of order and artistic beauty out of disorder and madness" (453). He also recognizes that McKay is attentive to the tradition of the sonnet's themes and how McKay appropriates those tropes for his own purposes. Keller states,

The usual content of the Renaissance sonnet includes expressions of both adoration and anger, the latter resulting from unrequited love. McKay cleverly manipulates these themes to his own advantage. The scorned

lover of the Petrarchan sonnet pleads with his unyielding mistress,
sometimes expressing admiration, sometimes hostility. McKay's attitude
toward America involves a similar dichotomy. (455)

There is more to be said about McKay's commitments to the traditions of the sonnet form, especially as it relates to his use of sonnet sequence conventions that are practiced in *The Cycle* (c. 1943). While Keller gives us invaluable information on the convention of the sonnet form as protest, this model doesn't adequately address all of McKay's poetic choices, nor do all his poems fit neatly into this model.

Antonella Francini's 2003 article, "Sonnet vs. Sonnet: The Fourteen Lines in African American Poetry," places McKay's sonnets in the larger context of the sonnet tradition. Francini begins her inquiry into the sonnet form in African American poetry by discussing the literary history of the form itself. She notes that the sonnet did not begin as "the highest formal expression of lyrical poetry" (1). "Nor was it merely an isolated text, but a metrical item likely to be read in association with similar compositions in a larger context" (1). The original qualities of the sonnet form are revitalized in the hands of African American sonneteers: "In making it one of their chosen modes of expression, these poets succeeded in recovering the sonnet's original function centuries after its birth and within a very different cultural setting" (1). Francini offers one of the few in-depth analyses of the sonnet form's parts, as it relates to the understanding of what is considered purely didactic in McKay's poetry.

While she recognizes what is literary in McKay's sonnets, noting that "a tactful handling of both technique and ideology guarantees the poem's effectiveness," she still

sees his poetry as largely an act of political resistance (2). She attributes this resistance to McKay's own admission in the introduction to his *Harlem Shadows* (1922). However, I believe she misinterprets McKay's position on his relationship to an already established tradition. He states, "I have adhered to such of the older traditions as I find adequate for my most lawless and revolutionary passions and moods . . . I have not hesitated to use words . . . considered poetically overworked and dead, when I thought I could make them glow alive by new manipulation" (McKay, "Author's Word" xx-xxi). While this seems that McKay is calling for a perversion of those traditions in order to create a "poetics of resistance," he is in fact aligning himself philosophically with the modernists of his era, such as T.S. Eliot (Rich 2). In Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), he explains that each poet should have an understanding of literary history and should seek to contribute to that history. Eliot states, "he [the poet] is not likely to know what is to be done [the work of creating poetry] unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living" (11). McKay shares these same aesthetic principles, recognizing how the old can be replenished and used to create new poetry. Therefore, he embraces the literary tradition that he is most familiar with and uses his historical sense to add to an existing poetic tradition. Francini concludes by stating that "the fourteen lines in African American poetry have opened up a space within tradition where, at least aesthetically, a dialogue between races and culture seems possible" (12). The way in which she summarizes the space within tradition in which the sonnets of African

American poets operates seems to contradict notions of a diametric opposition between the “two traditions,” as some would distinguish them.

The criticisms that are marked by their insistence that the sonnet seems ineffective for didactic expression or that the sonnet form is used solely as a vehicle of political protest bring up important questions about the functionality of the form on its content, and these criticisms also raise questions about which should be given priority in critical evaluation (form or content). As is the case with many distinctive poetic forms, there is a literary tradition that must be taken into account before we can ever hope to understand the full magnitude of the form used differently than in its traditional contexts. Critics, whose approaches to McKay’s sonnets are marked by their assertion that there is a unity present between content and form, suggest the poems have a transcendent literary value.

It would be an error to suggest that critics have completely failed to explore the continuity between form and content in their assessments of McKay’s sonnets, as I have already illustrated some of the most strident critics in opposition to this type of assessment have at least suggested its validity. However, this position has not received as much critical attention as the protest/resistance model. A journal article written in 1979, “An Urge Toward Wholeness: Claude McKay and His Sonnets,” by John Hillyer Condit, investigates the ways in which McKay’s life in conjunction with his poetry represents a conscious striving toward unity. Condit states his agenda plainly: “I will contend that Claude McKay sought as a man and a poet to resolve his universality and individuality on as transcendent a plane as possible” (351). Condit uses various evidences from critical

writings on McKay, McKay's own autobiography, his poetry, and his prose to create an accurate philosophical sketch of the controversial artist.

Condit immediately sets out to challenge what he would undoubtedly call a false dichotomy between form and content. For many, the dichotomy between form and content is comparable to the relationship between Western tradition form and the bitterness and hatred that is fostered as a result of the structures that sustain that civilization. Condit points out there is unity present even in seemingly strained relationships such as the relationship that McKay often examines between himself and America, which is personified as a woman (drawing connections to the Petrarchan lover, a common sonnet trope). In analyzing "The Mulatto," Condit says, "Through this hatred McKay could feel a part of his new world; even assert a kinship to his foes, without surrendering an iota of identity" (355). Therefore, there is a unity present even in the censure of an object in conflict with its lover. As Jean Wagner eloquently states, "The latter [love] can survive only to the degree that the former [hate] succeeds in isolating, destroying and rejecting everything in the beloved object that raises up obstacles to this love" (234-235). Destroying these obstacles does not mean replacing or destroying the thing itself. Nor does this hate operate outside the object of its derision. In order to be effective it must embrace the object and work from within to create a harmony in which the two can co-exist.

While this points to the themes of McKay's poems and his most recurrent source of conflict, America, this move toward unity can also relate to McKay's use of the sonnet form. Condit gives two reasons that explain why McKay chose the sonnet as his form.

First, “Mastering the sonnet would be irrefutable proof that he too was a ‘real poet,’” which suggests that McKay recognized the importance of the traditional English canon, even though it historically had excluded people of color (359). McKay did not have any illusions about his poetry operating outside the existing tradition of English poets. This perspective insures that the art of Blacks is not marginalized or compartmentalized. Secondly, Condit suggests that McKay used the form to control his emotions: “[T]he demanding nature of the sonnet’s metrical pattern and rhyme scheme would allow him to be his most passionate self without running amok” (359). Therefore, assertions about the tradition of the sonnet form being oppressive and ill-adapted to McKay’s radical content loses some of its validity, if we consider these strictures are, in fact, consciously imposed by the poet himself.

Lastly, Condit explains how content also represents a move toward unity even though it seems at odds with the form. He borrows from Paul Fussell when he discusses the “principle of imbalance,” which an apt sonneteer must recognize exists between the sonnet, structurally, and its content (120). The principle depends on the turn. The pressure that builds in the first eight lines is released and resolved in the sestet or concluding couplet. In the case of many of McKay’s sonnets, the release of pressure occurs in both the Petrarchan sestet and the Shakespearean couplet. The six-line hybrid of the two forms allows the couplet to “[serve] more as a ‘finishing kick’” instead of bearing the weight of the entire octave (Condit 360). Condit believes that “McKay’s sonnets often skillfully exploit this congruence between the sonnet form and his most typical theme” (359). Condit provides us with a great foundation for understanding

McKay's choices as a poet and sonneteer. There are other equally poignant sonnet conventions that are thematic and structural that McKay takes advantage of, which all add to painting a complete picture of this artist's craftsmanship. McKay uses the sequence to thematically map out the course of his life and various rhetorical arrangements to enhance his arguments.

Not all critics express as assuredly as the critics I have reviewed thus far an adamant claim about the functionality of the sonnet with its radical content. Clenora Hudson-Weems takes a different approach, vying for the critical space between these polarized views. She expresses that each side has legitimate claims about the compatibility or conflict of Black protest and Western form. However, her valuation of the ways in which the form and content complement each other is based on some of the same narrow assumptions about the poem's novelty or its aim at "semi-shock treatment" (Hudson-Weems 1). Hudson-Weems's censure of the form does not add anything to our understanding of its failures either. She points out the irony of his decision, and asserts "the intensity of the message has been somewhat scarified" as a result (5). However, she gives little real evidence of this in her explication of the sonnets themselves. In the end, Hudson-Weems remains reluctant to take a definitive stance on the issue and concludes with unconvincing praise: "[T]his style is at least crafty and provocative, if not wholly effective" (5).

Although diverse in their approaches and assessments of McKay's sonnets, these criticisms spanning four decades offer a small but important glimpse into the complexities of McKay's poetry and the difficulty of defining his poetic persona. His

poetry is so attached to who McKay really was or strived to be that its importance is incalculable. As William Maxwell notes in his introduction to Complete Poems, “[McKay] romantically declared that he wrote poetry without regard for payment” (xix). Maxwell notes that the commodities that are his novels are markedly different from his poetry both aesthetically and thematically. Therefore, a true understanding of McKay the man and McKay the sonneteer depends on the true marriage of form and content in critical analysis. While my critical assessment of McKay’s sonnets lends toward the polarized views expressed by critics such as Condit, I’m not proposing that there is no revolutionary context in which these poems can be cast, as they have undoubtedly been cast into those contexts by his and our contemporaries alike. However, these assessments only consider a small amount of McKay’s poetry and restrict the ways in which his later poetry can be interpreted as in conversation with his earlier works.

By offering an interpretation of McKay’s technical prowess as a sonneteer in *The Cycle* (c. 1943) and tracing the ways in which these poems fit into a chronological narrative of McKay’s poetry, and perhaps account for the narrative as a whole, I hope to demonstrate that McKay’s statement about the freedom he enjoys as a “vagabond soul . . ., an outlaw soul that cannot reconcile itself to the fact of limitation to any one country or allegiance to any one nation” also applies to the development of his poetry (qtd in xi).

CHAPTER THREE

MCKAY AND THE SONNET TRADITION

*...if you want to pit against how a craftsman, a goldsmith, an engraver, might feel about someone changing his design—then you will understand how I feel . . .*⁶

In Chapter Two, I have assessed the critical opinions of a selected group of scholars who have varying opinions on McKay's use of the sonnet form in conjunction with its most typical themes. However, what is most telling about their assessments, and points to the unfinished work in scholarship on McKay's poetic career, is that most critics, excluding Francini, fail to discuss their theories in relation to McKay's commitments to the sonnet form's integrity and history. Giving attention to this would have given Lederer, for instance, a greater context and richer critical soil in which to investigate the divisions between what he describes as literary and didactic sonnets. The classical contexts in which these poems undoubtedly find their roots seem to be a secondary concern when discussing McKay's sonnets. This is due to critics' preoccupation with how his poems address the Black experience in the cultural context of the 1920's-1940's.

However, that experience is not isolated from the dominant culture's aesthetics and therefore must be assessed in relation to it. McKay understood this as well, stating that "intrinsically it [Negro art] must be compared with the white man's achievement and judged by the same standards" (A Long Way From Home 270). Francini gives us a glimpse into what is gained through this type of in-depth investigation in relation to

⁶ "To Alain Locke," 1 Aug. 1926. Cooper 144.

McKay's full body of poetry, in her explication of the formal intricacies of "If We Must Die." In order to properly investigate any poet's use of the sonnet form, arguably one of the most popular prescribed verse forms in the English language, we as critics must accept one seemingly elementary notion—that is, "[i]t is impossible to write any poem without being conscious of pattern . . ." (Spiller, The Sonnet 21). This is particularly important for the sonnet because the poet is aware of its structure before he/she begins to write; therefore, one must assume that the poet is, in fact, cognizant of the form's liberties and limitations. Poets who choose the sonnet as their medium do not arbitrarily fill their fourteen lines. Surely, even a college professor teaching a sophomore literature course, who asks his/her students to write a sonnet as practice for understanding the form, would advise his/her students to be mindful of the ways in which form and content work together. This notion of form consciousness is exactly what Condit summarizes as an all "too frequently slighted craftsmanship" when discussing critics' approach to McKay's sonnets (364).

Therefore, since the author willingly gives into formal restraints when writing sonnets, there must be something worthwhile that is gained as a result of that choice. According to Spiller, "The sonnet pre-emptively solves two problems: proportion and extension; and, while this is a challenge, it is also a security, a kind of metrical extension of feudalism, a definite service required and requited" (Spiller, The Development 2). What I wish to uncover in McKay's cycle poems is what is required of McKay structurally and requited thematically. Sonneteers have found creative ways to revise the structure of the sonnet based on their understanding of the strengths of various formal

arrangements. While sonneteers can significantly vary the constructions of a sonnet, a sonneteer who deviates from the standard models of the form does so with a consciousness of that base formula. The two basic formulas that have been attributed to their most famous, but not first, practitioners are the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnets.

Which form a poet chooses has, of course, formulaic implications as well as thematic. The Petrarchan sonnet, rhyming ABBA ABBA CDECDE, is divided into octave and sestet, the octave introducing a problem or situation, and the sestet offering some sort of resolution or compromise.⁷ Therefore, thematically the poet must give the reader enough information to understand the conflict in eight lines and provide a succinct and convincing conclusion in six. Structure and sense are also apparent in corresponding rhymed lines, as well as those that are successive. The rhyme scheme in both Petrarchan and Shakespearean versions accounts for syntactical sense and line divisions, (4+4) + (3+3) in the Petrarchan rhyme and (4+4 + 4) + (2) in the Shakespearean. However, this is not always the case, as we will see in some of McKay's sonnets that the syntactical sense can be divided into even smaller units, where individual lines carry with them two meanings, individual and comprehensive. The Shakespearean sonnet, McKay's form of choice, ends with a shorter, more pressing conclusion than Petrarch's standard tercet, CDE conclusion. The couplet's rhyming lines rhythmically announce that the end has come, which punctuates the "impression of immediacy" that the sonnet "because of its

⁷ Other variants of the sestet include CDCDCD and CDEEDC.

brevity” already stipulates (5). Often proverbial or epigrammatic, these final two lines have the potential to reinforce or revise everything stated in the previous twelve lines.

As mentioned earlier, poets who use the sonnet as their vehicle of poetic expression do have the freedom to make some decisions as far as the formal elements are concerned. While the octave is usually consistent, either rhyming ABBA in both quatrains of the Petrarchan sonnet or ABAB CDCD in the Shakespearean, the sestet has a number of variants that may be attempted. While McKay uses the Shakespearean rhyme scheme, the thematic break between octave and sestet that is the cornerstone of the Petrarchan form is still evident in his sonnets. He makes an explicit statement about the connection between his largely Shakespearean form and Petrarch’s by the appearance of blank space between the first eight lines and the last six in nearly every sonnet in the sequence. McKay’s hybrid sonnet allows for a significant first and then second turn with the concluding couplet: (4+4) + (4+2). The canzone, whose metrical divisions are the closest kin to the traditional sonnet, may have influenced how we divide octave and sestet rhythmically, metrically, and conceptually:

Originally, this break seems to have been a musical requirement . . . The verbal recognition of this musical alteration is first of all syntactic: a new sentence at the change, or perhaps a medial pause in a long sentence. But this in turn begets a conceptual alteration, turning proportionality of lengths into consequentiality of thought. (4)

Proportionally, the turn has traditionally occurred at the sestet and octave breaks in the Petrarchan sonnet with the addition of the couplet break in the Shakespearean version.

However, authors have tried syntactical variations that can break “down into single lines or even half-lines” (33).

The most common syntactical arrangement in the forty-nine sonnets that appear in “The Cycle” is (4+4) in the octave and (4+2) in the sestet, accounting for more than half of the entire sequence.

Sonnet Math: Most Common Syntactic Arrangements of “The Cycle”

4+4 4+2	4+4 6	2+2+4 4+2	8 4+2	4+4 2+2+2	2+2+4 6	4+4 3+3
1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 26, 27, 29, 32, 36, 42, 43, 45, 46, 48, 49.	21, 24* ⁸ , 28*, 34, 53, 11	2, 7, 10, 15, 52	31, 50	30	35	25

The next most common arrangement is (4+4) + (6). In these sonnets, McKay attempts to make the entire sestet organic, taking away some of the rhythmic force from the concluding couplet, creating a somber mood rather than promoting witticism or connoting epigrammatism. While this choice creates a unique tension between rhyme and sense, it also demonstrates McKay’s cognizance of form and illustrates how he, although committed to the form, playfully disorders the “pretty room”⁹ in which the sonnet lives. While variations in the octave and sestet are equally attempted, variations in

⁸ * In “24” and “28,” there is a distinct sense break between the first three lines of the sestet and the last.

⁹ From John Donne’s “The Canonization.”

the octave are the most experimental. The most common deviation from the (4+4) syntactical quatrain break in the octave is simply a division of the first four lines into two shorter 2-line sentences, (2+2+4). This division allows McKay to make more than one premise in the first quatrain. This is a perfect example of the poet's ability to make room in a sonnet, although it is a prescribed form, which seemingly has no room to make. As expressed by Alistair Fowler, "Far from inhibiting the author, genres are a positive support. They offer room, as one might say . . . a literary matrix by which to order his experience during composition" (31). "Cycle 22" and "Cycle 41" have the same rhetorical framework, beginning with a syntactically complete line that introduces the topic of the succeeding lines. The first four lines of each sonnet begin with a (1+3 . . .) division:

Black intellectuals dive deep for the bait.
It is easy our misfortune to transfer
To blind Class Struggle, even at Heaven's gate
We shout to God our blessings to confer!

(McKay, "22" 1-4)

No lady of the land will praise my book.
It would not even be brought to her attention,
By those advising where and how to look
For items which make favorable mention.

("41" 1-4)

“22” ends with a standard quatrain, while “41” breaks up that syntactical arrangement, ending with 2+2 instead. While lines 5-6 do not constitute a complete thought, we can deduce from McKay’s consistent use of the period to mark divisions in rhyme scheme and arguments that he wants this fragment to be read as such: “Because my writings are not party stuff, / For those who follow the old trodden track” (“41” 5-6). The syntactical tercet that appears at lines 2-4 introduce a point of fact, which “it” statements often signify. While in “41” the remaining quatrain is reserved for further explanation of the tercet with two additional points, in “22” McKay summarizes the effect of lines 2-4 “upon our [present] woes” (6). Both rhetorical approaches are effective in their respective sonnets because they emphasize the dialectical arrangement of the argument upon which the sonnet depends. What is important in looking at these syntactical breaks that the Shakespearean octave and sestet support and the variations of that arrangement is that McKay makes what I consider a move toward unity in content that is initiated by his use of different syntactical forms. Therefore, the sonnet has the power to “accommodate both what is immediately felt and what is discursively developed” (Spiller, The Development 135). Ironically, “[i]t is not until a really skilled sonneteer begins to disturb the structure of the sonnet that one realises . . . how powerful the sonnet frame is. It will continue to bestow a sense of order achieved even while all sort of disturbances are taking place within it” (51). The power of the sonnet to maintain its external unity despite internal chaos or angst is something upon which McKay depends.

However, we must be mindful not to imply as Melvin B. Tolson does that “McKay’s radicalism was in content—not form” either, because the sonnet has been the

stage for all kinds of discourse (289). Spiller declares at the end of his chapter on the early sonnet that [i]f ‘to be a sonnet’ meant anything more than ‘to have such and such a form’—if it involved . . . ideas of decorum of subject and lexis, then the sonnet might never have been extended to the world of the piazza and the market” (The Sonnet 26). This is not to say that over its development that these designations weren’t attached to the sonnet, as a variety of others would be. However, what is more important to note is the rich history that the sonnet has of containing a wide range of discourses which it can effectively manage within its designated fourteen lines. In Joseph Phelan’s introduction to The Nineteenth-Century Sonnet, he explains that “[t]he sonnet, in fact, played an important role in the broad cultural reaction against Victorian earnestness and Puritanism which characterized the latter part of the nineteenth century; poets turned to the history of the sonnet for instruction in and sanction for dissenting attitudes and beliefs” (4). Still, I point this out not to take away from the urgency of McKay’s poetry in his own time but to celebrate his decision to use a form that was historically suitable for such poetry.

In the sonnets that make up *The Cycle* (c. 1943) McKay has used the form’s inherent rhetorical structures to enhance and validate his emotions. The introductory poem to the sequence, which will be referred to several times through the remaining chapters gives us ample critical ground on which to discuss the successes of the sequence as a whole. Therefore, I will use it as an example to illustrate various different modes of looking at the sonnets individually and the sequence as a whole. The technical aspects of the sonnets and how they deal with the rhetorical structure of the sonnet, as I have discussed it, are the primary focus of the poem’s application here.

“The Cycle” is one of only two sonnets in the sequence in which the syntax is enjambed in the traditional sense of the term. While enjambment is prevalent through out the sequence, each metrical line is at least understood as a clause or phrase that will introduce or complete a thought. Based on the “sonnet math” that I have introduced earlier in this chapter, this poem’s octave breaks into a very irregular ($4\frac{1}{5} + 3\frac{4}{5}$) stanza. Fittingly, the other poem, “Cycle 47,” that has a similar syntactical division is set up as a companion piece to “The Cycle,” readdressing McKay’s conflict with both blacks and whites. More than conveniently completing the metrical line, these octaves give the impression of passions run amok, suitable for both beginning and ending.

In “The Cycle” the speaker begins by taking critical authority over the interpretation of the entire sequence: “Thěse pœms| dīstīlled | frōm my | ěxpér | iěncé, / Ěxáct | ly téll | my féel | ĩngs ōf | tōdáy” (McKay 1-2). McKay’s two-fold objective is revealed in these telling first lines. First, he wishes to be recorder, critic, and historian of his own experiences, and plot how his experiences have affected him in the past and how they have influenced him at present. Secondly, McKay anticipates the most damaging criticism that these poems have received since their inception—that they are too personal or too didactic. As Barbara Griffin notes in her article, “The Last Word: Claude McKay’s Unpublished ‘Cycle Manuscript,’” McKay “confesses that his poems are emotional responses to his own personal problems” (43).

However, more important than his admission of emotional openness, is his decision as a poet to communicate these emotions “exactly,” rather than like Shelley, Keats, or the Elizabethans, who would romanticize or dramatize the experience (Cooper

309). McKay's autonomy is expressed in the structure of the poem as well. By end stopping the first two lines with a comma, McKay structurally closes any other discussion of his poetry that is not of his own making. The first line has some movement because McKay uses a sequence of longer words to create the iambic pentameter. However, the fluidity of the line is abruptly closed by the use of shorter words to create the iambic pentameter of the second line. Because the line is end-stopped, the reader pauses to reflect on the uncompromising conclusiveness of those opening lines.

The next line serves to both modify the subsequent line and make a poignant statement of its own. "Thě crú | ěl ģnd | thě vć | ioũ ģnd | thě ténse" are abstract but forceful expressions of the poet's angst (McKay, "The Cycle" 3). Rhythmically, the line deviates from the standard iambs, using a pyrrhic ever other foot. This seems to further highlight the syllables that are stressed. Because of their scope, these phrases represent a collective struggle, a struggle whose presence is far-reaching and undeniable. This sense of a collective struggle among humanity is supported by the ambiguity of these phrases. Although he uses the definitive article "the" in order to objectify these adjectives, because they are, in fact, adjectives and not nouns, they include everything that may be considered cruel, vicious, and tense, expressing a mass sentiment.

In the next line, the speaker moves from a collective consciousness to a personal evaluation of the effect of these "conditions" on him. The strong emotion of the previous line begins to slow in line 4 through McKay's use of perfect iambic pentameter: "Cõndí | tiõns whćh | hǎve hédged | my bít | těr wáy" (4). Enjambment and the caesura that concludes the thought complete the process. This stop signifies a change in content as

well as tone. The following lines introduce McKay as a Christ figure, a recurring image throughout the cycle. In line six, McKay's decision to conclude with an anapest helps soften the impact of "song," which is then juxtaposed to the corresponding rhyme's exclamatory conclusion. What is at first a soft and enduring song of patient struggle transforms into an invective accusation by the speaker: "Ốf hát | rěd básed | ốn thě | ếssén | tấal wróng" (8).

The sestet signifies a significant turn and echoes the opening lines of the poem: "Bữt | tómorrów" (9). While McKay seems to establish the authority that the following poems have on his "feelings of today" in the opening lines of the octave, the beginning of the sestet calls that into question. McKay further exercises his authority as poet and critic by stating that although these poems are his definitive work at present, he will reserve the right to change his mind in the future: "Nỗ crí | tíc, whíte | ốr black | cắn tíe | mế dówn" (10). Structurally, the first line of this section corresponds to the sixth line of the octave, further emphasizing the conflict between the two line groups. Again, McKay undermines the song in line six; the tune in line eight complicates the ongoing song because it has the potential to be overwritten. The subsequent expressions are more conclusive than the ideas he expresses in the previous lines; each line is end-stopped, signifying McKay's desire for the reader to contemplate each statement's validity.

The prevalence of additional unstressed syllables at the ends of rhythmically consistent iambic pentameter lines is explained in the poem itself. Not only does McKay refuse to be marginalized by critics in expressing himself freely in content, but also in form. Phrases, such as "tie me down" and "unclipped wings," point to his variation of

the standard five feet. Ironically, the one line in the sestet that maintains perfect iambic pentameter, line 10, is the one in which the speaker declares he will not be tied down. This may, in fact, give more validity to his statement because though he is perfectly capable of keeping the form, he defiantly says that he would prefer not to. The statement that seems to resonate from this line and the *The Cycle* (c. 1943) as a whole is that McKay is a poet, who whether writing in conjunction with or against the prevailing opinions of his time will choose autonomy before appraisal: “For I, a poet, can soar with unclipped wings, / From earth to heaven, while chanting of all things” (13-14). The extension of these lines structurally becomes the unclipped wings that grants McKay access to heaven and earth. He seems to be making a metapoetic statement about the room he feels he has even in the close confines of the sonnet. McKay denies the “resistive theory of art” implied by many of his fellow sonneteers, which says “the poet is subdued or caught, and must work against or struggle against confines . . .” (Spiller, The Development 9). McKay’s position may be the very reason why there are so many variations present in the sequence. The next chapter will deal with the sequence as a whole and how the poet introduced here will deal with the problems of “continuity or discontinuity of self” and art throughout the sequence.

CHAPTER FOUR

MCKAY AND THE LYRIC SONNET SEQUENCE

*For I do want to do a book of them*¹⁰

The Cycle (c. 1943) has received very little criticism, and based on the way in which the collection is described in McKay's biographies, few readers would be compelled to seek it out. McKay's critics are correct in their assessment of the work as emotional and didactic. However, I find myself at odds with those critics because they use these terms negatively, characterizing them as artistic flaws. These characteristics can help demonstrate why the work has literary merit because these characteristics bind *The Cycle* (c. 1943) to the tradition of the lyric sonnet sequence, as it was practiced by Petrarch. McKay is also noticeable influenced by sixteenth and seventeenth century British sonneteers as such as Shakespeare and Milton, as well as other Italian sonneteers such as Guittone, whose religious conversion changed his approach to sonnet writing. However, Petrarch's distinct sequence persona is not only the prototype for these sonnet writers but has its most direct connection to McKay, as he adopts Petrarch's prototypical sequence introduction as his own. Using the narrating present *I* to reclaim authorship over his poetry and establish himself as critic of his own life and work.

First, it is important to discuss the ways in which McKay's sequence fits into the category of a lyric sonnet sequence as a sonnet scholar, Michael R.G. Spiller, defines it. He discusses the history of the different types of sonnet sequences and the course of their

¹⁰ "To Max Eastman," 21 Mar. 1945. Cooper 309.

development in the hands of their most famous practitioners. Spiller proposes in his introduction to The Sonnet Sequence: A Study of its Strategies that while poets have used the sequence for purposes ranging from the philosophic to the political, the device is best in the hands of those “who use it as the locus of a quest for understanding of the self in a world where a powerful and compelling Other offers a vision of disturbing beauty” (2). While *The Cycle* (c. 1943) has elements of the philosophic and political, those elements add to what is described above as the exploration of “self” that the lyric sonnet sequence marks.

Before delving into the ways in which *The Cycle* (c.1943) embodies the qualities of a full-fledged lyric sonnet sequence, it is first essential to note the difficulties that present themselves in calling any series of sonnets a sequence. Spiller points out that neither single authorship nor the “accident” of publication makes a group of sonnets a sequence. Therefore, it is quite a special happening when an “author not only places them together but says, or indicates that they are connected . . .” (16). While a few of the poems included in what became “*The Cycle*” were published individually, McKay had always intended to have them published together as a sonnet sequence. In the first letter to mention the sequence’s publication, McKay asks Eastman if anyone will “take a try at . . . [his] poems” (Cooper 306). In the spring of 1945, McKay wrote another letter to Eastman expressing his gratitude for Eastman’s editorial contribution to the work. He then states, “For I do want to do a book of them,” pointing again to the cohesion of the sonnets as a sequence (309).

As it is expressed in the title itself, the collection of forty-nine sonnets and four song-like interludes was to be read as a sequence in and of itself, as well as a sequence “in sequence” with others that have been written before and after. Francini remarks that the sonnet is “likely to be read in association with similar compositions in a larger context”; the sonnet sequence has a similar historical significance (1). The sequence’s significance may be considered even more substantive than that of a single sonnet because not only does it carry with it “sonnetness” but “sequence-ness” as well. Besides authorial intention, the sequence is unique because it deals with a “difficulty no other genre in prose or verse presents” and that is what Spiller coins “the problem of aggregation” (The Sonnet 20). Authors of the sequence must create “a whole of items that are also meaningful separately” (20). While all sequences, formal, narrative, and lyric, have to deal with this issue on some level, it is the lyric sequence whose aggregation seems the most problematic because “nothing connects the sonnets beyond the presence of a speaking or mediating /I/ . . .” (17). Spiller adds, “the reader’s desire to find patterns and sustain connection may be powerfully contributory—something on which the poet can rely” (17). The relationship between the speaker and the reader is at the crux of understanding the sequence’s themes as well as its formal continuity. The metapoetic quality of the lyric sequence drives the reader to follow the course of the speaker’s development of self because the speaker makes it explicitly clear, usually in the opening sonnet of the sequence, that these poems will, in fact, explain the speaker’s moods at present, in the past, and during the duration of the sequence itself.

This metapoetic opening to the entire sequence has been an established trope in the sequence genre for ages, which “establishes at the start . . . the presence of a narrating / I / in charge of poesis” (80). Spiller notes the importance of Petrarch’s proem as a model for all sequences to follow, pointing to the fact that while Petrarch reworked *Rime Sparse* (~1335-1374) for almost forty years, he continued to select this poem as its introduction. Therefore, “in a way [this poem is] the entry into all sequences that would follow” (80). If Petrarch’s *Rime Sparse* has this much influence on the tradition of the lyric sonnet sequence, in evaluating what McKay seems to have presented to us as a lyric sonnet sequence, we must scrutinize McKay’s introductory sonnet and measure its commitments to sustaining that model. There are five distinct characteristics of Petrarch’s proem that Spiller provides us for such a comparison:

1. The sequence recounts a personal development: it is the history of an individual, who has been in different states at different times (lines 1-4).¹¹
2. The sonnets actually record the voice of that individual as he suffers, and his differences are their differences (lines 5-6).
3. The individual as he is now can, and does, revalue what the earlier / I / felt or thought (lines 9-10).
4. This is a revaluation that the reader is encouraged to accept and share insofar as he or she can treat the sonnets as mirrors (lines 7-8).

¹¹ These numbers correspond to lines in Petrarch’s *Rime Sparse* 1.

5. The narrating / I / is wise—or wiser than the earlier self, and the poetry thus becomes an ordered experience of disorder (lines 12-14). (81)

It is no accident that McKay's "The Cycle" addresses the same themes in the corresponding lines of his proem. In lines 1-4, McKay takes on Petrarch's persona in a much more forceful way. While Petrarch includes an apostrophe to "you," the reader, the audience in McKay's prelude, although rarely referred to by the second person pronoun in the sequence, is ever-present because of the emphatic address of the speaker, whose passion attracts the attention of anyone in earshot.

The opening lines of the poem, as promised, introduce the history of the poet and inform the reader that it is this history that will be the subject of his sequence:

These poems distilled from my experience
Exactly tell my feelings of today,
The cruel and the vicious and the tense
Conditions which have hedged my bitter way
Of life. . . . (McKay, "The Cycle" 1-5)

It is easy to draw comparisons between Petrarch's "scattered verses"¹² and McKay's "distilled" poems (Spiller, "1" 1; "The Cycle" 1). While Petrarch's "scattered verses" connote a leisurely approach to his subject matter, McKay must distill his poems, pointing to his careful consideration of the ideas he will express, which are attached to a sense of temporal angst. McKay continues to use Petrarch as a model but revises the sympathies the Italian poet expresses about the tragedy of unrequited love as connected

¹² Quotations from Petrarch's *Rime Sparse* 1 are Spiller's translation.

to the tragedy of “hatred based on the essential wrong” (“The Cycle” 8). Petrarch names the errors of his youth as the source of his grief. McKay, on the other hand, names “conditions” outside of his own actions as responsible for hedging his “bitter way” (4). McKay is reacting to a stimulus and Petrarch is the source of both the problem and the solution. This difference is important in understanding how the fourth criterion is met in McKay’s introductory poem, which will be discussed later.

In lines 5-6, Petrarch qualifies his heartache with descriptive words such as “weep,” “cry,” “vain hopes,” and “fruitless grief” (Spiller, “1” 5-6). However, McKay’s corresponding lines describe a silent suffering, marked by personal resolve and endurance: “But though I suffered much I bore / My cross and lived to put my trouble in song” (McKay, “The Cycle” 5-6). This is the first of many allusions to the passion of Christ, an experience McKay has no scruples about connecting to the metaphor of his own life. This assertion of authority over the narrative of his own experiences widens and extends into what Spiller describes as the third criteria. Lines 9-10 mark the poet’s re-evaluation of his present and past self. However, McKay takes it further, including his future self: “But tomorrow I may sing another tune / No critic, white or black, can tie me down” (9-10). McKay’s lines are void of any indication of remorse or regret, making it an *apologia pro vita sua* instead of the apology that Petrarch offers in lines 9-11.

Unlike McKay’s, Petrarch’s connection to his readers (criteria 4) depends on their willingness to pity him and identify with his quest for love. McKay wants neither “pity” nor “just pardon” to be the source of his readers’ shared valuation of the work (Spiller, “1” 8). What drives his readers instead is their capacity to recognize truth and McKay’s

willingness to bare all: “I stripped down harshly to the naked core / Or hatred based on the essential wrong!” (“The Cycle” 7-8). The last organizational feature of the introductory sonnet provides the most appropriate summation of the speaker’s character, thematically and functionally, as it appears in the concluding couplet. The sage poet has the wisdom to critique his earlier self. This wisdom is also attached to a sense of transcendent knowledge that the speaker has access to, unlike his earlier self and, in the case of McKay, the reader. This wisdom also serves another purpose implied in Petrarch’s poem as well, although not as explicitly stated. In including the reader, McKay exercises his authority as poet, reminding the reader that there is a sort of spiritual hierarchy that is maintained throughout the sequence, which gives complete authority to the artist. However restrictive, this does not necessarily take away the importance of the reader, as long as the authorial reader accepts the persona of the narrating *I* as he introduces himself in the opening poem.

Moving from the overall theme of the sequence, as defined in the introductory poem, to the ways in which these characteristics relate to the other poems in the sequence, Spiller notes that although Petrarch’s sequence is “wholly devoted to the praise of a woman, it [the proemial¹³ sonnet] does not actually mention her at all but instead focuses on the multiple personas of the speaker” (The Sonnet 81). Likewise, in his introduction, McKay doesn’t explicitly preface the majority of the content that would follow. However, this is understandable because the ultimate process of the sequence is to reveal to the reader the speaker’s mind. Therefore, themes that arise throughout the

¹³ Spiller’s, 81.

sequence remain subordinate to this aim, insofar as “each sonnet function[s] as a starting image for a lyrical or meditative response” (29). McKay uses this model throughout the cycle sequence, which holds together the psyche of the poet while he filters these “distilled” experiences. Poets who undertake these meditative sequences in order to rationalize and explain the unity present in their experiences are using the same rhetorical and psychological approach as Petrarch:

[A]s he grew older, Petrarch became increasingly occupied with the hereafter and used the narrating /I/ to represent the present time, while the narrated /I/ was the past, and his desire for Laura . . . reached into the future. The /I-who speaks/ thus occupies ‘now,’ the present point of the reader and the speaker, and the sonnets themselves range through past and future. The /I-who speaks/, and—if one follows Petrarch’s lead—the sonnet sequence is a kind of battle for existence. (90)

McKay also understands the power that the narrating *I* has to create order out of disorder. These sonnets “. . . can with goodwill be read into wholeness or continuity” (85). The lyric sonnet sequence, then, becomes a particularly apt vehicle for McKay to evaluate his life, as many critics would charge him with the sin of inconsistency and expose what they view as contradictions in his work. As mentioned earlier, McKay does not apologize in the same way that Petrarch does, asking for the sequence to be read with forgiveness if it fails (85). Instead, he focuses on developing the authority of the narrating *I* to insure that he never has to offer such an apology.

In his proem to the sequence, McKay introduces himself as a transcendent being, who is not restricted by time. Structurally, the poem works to enforce the idea of time-travel. The octave summarizes what will be discussed later in the sequence about the poet's past. The narrating present *I* is looming over the past, while the past possesses its own urgency. The influence of the past on his present self is intensified by the inherent relationship between subject and verb, in which the verb provides physical and temporal qualifications. The sestet introduces the future *I*: "But tomorrow, I may sing . . ." (McKay, "The Cycle" 9). In this line, the presence of the narrating *I* is even more acute because McKay chooses to add a deflective auxiliary verb (may) to imply a possible move forward or connote a personality consistent with his current state of being. It is not surprising that McKay reserves the couplet for the narrating *I*, as it is this voice that gives us entrance into and guides us through the succeeding sonnets. It is here that the narrating *I* draws its authority. In addition to having access to both past and an imagined future, the narrating *I* draws its sovereignty from a historically weighty appositive that declares, "I . . . can" because I am "a poet" (13).

While not every poem in the sequence includes the first-person pronoun, the narrating *I* still remains implicit in the readers' understanding that a single speaker directs them through all fourteen lines. However, it is the poems in which the narrating *I* is present and simultaneously offering insight into the past and future that provide the best examples of McKay's psychology, as they relate to his ownership over the authorship of his own life. The second poem in the sequence logically transitions from the title poem. It also introduces McKay's cognizance of what I mentioned earlier as "the problem of

aggregation.” “Now” is the first among many transitions that McKay uses to create rhetorical continuity between sonnets, in addition to the presence of the narrating *I*.

“Cycle 1”¹⁴ deals exclusively with the relationship of the *I*, in all its temporal forms, to the subject matter that will be introduced. This poem acts as a second introduction to the sequence itself, noting the importance of the reader’s complete understanding of such a narrator:

Now, really I never cared a damn
For being on the wrong side of the fence,
Even though I was naked as a lamb,
And thought by many to be just as dense.
But being black and poor, I always feel
That all I have and hold is my own mind,
In which I am quite rich in woe and weal
And need not barter for mess of any kind.
For what have I, oh brothers of mine to lose?
Except a piece or so of my black skin,
That I against the elements may bruise
From incompetent manouvre or from sin!
But whatever it may be, this is a fact,
I care not if my mind remains intact. (“1” 1-14)

¹⁴ Griffin’s designations.

As in “The Cycle,” time is organized structurally as well as thematically. While the sestet is dedicated to the future *I*, the octave is split evenly between past and present. The lines end-stopped with a period signify this split. Even though McKay makes these structural divisions of time, the narrating *I*’s authority remains acute in sections that deal with past and future. McKay points directly to the various rhetorical operations of the present tense. Beginning the first four lines with the definitive “Now” reinforces the notion of presentness in the past. However, because “now” is a weakened state of the present tense and can represent just before present and just after, it does not devalue the speaker’s discourse on the past. This is further emphasized by what McKay says about the consistency of his past self in relation to his present self: “Now, really I have never cared a damn / For being on the wrong side of the fence” (1-2). He establishes at the start that he has always been an outsider and embraces that distinction. Spiller says that this “feature is a readily recognizable Petrarchan persona” (The Sonnet 28). He describes the Petrarchan persona: “The sequence . . . was projected from the persona of someone who stood slightly outside or above the society that he . . . commented on: he or she might be disappointed in love and thus outside the sphere of the beloved, if not an actual outcast” (28). This metaphor continues in the next two lines dedicated to McKay’s representation of his past self.

He states that he was “as naked as a lamb” but he cared not about the above-mentioned exile (McKay, “1” 3). Being outside the safety of the “fence” from line 2 or in other words, popular opinion, McKay has exposed himself to the wolves. These allusions to the lamb and the wolves are the first of many such comparisons McKay

makes to himself and Christ, using the sacrificial slaughter of the lamb as representative of his own crucifixion in society. However, moving into the present, McKay states that what is important is not his body but his mind, relating the present to the past state of being “naked” (3). He also makes a rhetorical connection to the first four lines by equating the denseness of the lamb’s wool to mental denseness. However, McKay manages another rhetorical switch when he changes the meaning of “dense” later in line 6. Here, dense equates to the richness of “woe and weal” in his mind, applying the positive denotation to the word (7). In McKay’s reversal of the importance of mind over body, he refers to the Biblical story of Esau, “who sold his birthright to Jacob for a mess of potage” (Maxwell 369). In James Weldon Johnson’s appropriation of the story in his 1912 novel Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, he also addresses the importance of spiritual fortitude over physical torment. In order to escape the physical woes of a world that rejects him because of his skin color, Johnson’s protagonist risks the corruption of his mind, which McKay warns must remain intact. In fact, McKay’s birthright is an inherent mental sensibility that puts him outside the circle of the black intelligentsia’s propagandist agendas.

The sestet also discusses issues expressed in both the past and present. The future *I* says that his dissent will only cost him “a piece or so of my black skin,” “a distant allusion to the pound of flesh demanded by the usurer Shylock in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*” (McKay, “1” 10; Maxwell 369). The “incompetent manouvre” (sic) and “sin” point back to McKay’s claim that he will not “barter” like Esau. The “incompetent manouvre” may hearken back to Esau’s and the ex-colored man’s poor

decision-making or Shylock's thwarted plan for revenge. The "sin" points directly to usury and that usury alludes to the Black elite using the speaker as a mouthpiece. The moral and satirical nature of the following sonnets in the sequence is introduced in the epigrammatic couplet that concludes this poem: "But whatever it may be, this is a fact, / I care not if my mind remains intact" (McKay, "1" 13-14). The lines retain their fierceness even though the lyrical qualities of a couplet often connote a light-hearted approach toward the subject.

However, the introduction of the Chaucerian line, marked by a caesura in the middle of the line, adds force and magnitude to the words directly preceding. End-stopping the line also helps to temporarily break up the metrical sound of the iambic pentameter, in order for the reader to meditate on the weight of the words and the solemn tone of the speaker. In this line the future is implied by the line "But whatever it may be" (13). Here, McKay again plays with time. In the next line, he makes a future-present statement, asserting that he knows what will be "fact" for his future self (13). The final line of this poem is important to note because it is the speaker's mental fortitude that the reader depends upon throughout the sequence. The reader must read "aright what . . . [he] was, and know . . . that what . . . [he] was is connected still to what . . . [he] is" and will be (Spiller, The Sonnet 85). McKay describes the results of an incorrect reading of his past and present by his critics in "Cycle 11."

McKay changes the formula that proves effective in "Cycle 1" in order to demonstrate the pertinence of instituting the authorial *I*. As in "1" the octave is split evenly between past and present, while the sestet is dedicated to the future. However,

McKay artificially gives up authority in the octave to give a voice to his critics, allowing them to narrate what he is and was. The first four lines are dedicated to his critical and social reception at present. He provides vivid, stinging, and unforgiving imagery, seemingly giving validity to their argument. However, since it is his words that give life to their thoughts, he destroys their argument by demonstrating his proficiency as a poet.

The way in which McKay romanticizes what his critics interpret as the pitiable decline of an artist, whose age has hindered his judgment, is stunning. While McKay illustrates his concern for his own mistreatment, he also manages to sympathize with others like him: “Where wrecks of many more were sadly heaped” (McKay, “11” 4). In recognizing the pain of others and admitting that his persecution is not unprecedented, he likens himself to Christ. This analogy is at the core of how McKay improves the lyric sonnet sequence’s preoccupation with the revelations of the speaker himself. Although the primary concern of the sequence is the reader’s understanding of the speaker, the compassionate speaker has been a trope of the traditional lyric sequence from its inception, which coupled with the Christian doctrines of forgiveness and salvation through Christ, add another layer of depth and complexity to our perception of the speaker. McKay is able to move his focus from group consciousness and compassion to a largely egoistic exploration of his own experiences in the next line. While these may seem to be contradictory aims, or at least irreconcilable in the short span of fourteen lines, Spiller reminds us that the entire sequence itself may not be capable of offering such a reconciliation: “A sonnet sequence, special among literary genres, does not have to reconcile opposed positions: it can simply leave them side by side” (Spiller, The

Sonnet 117). Therefore, wholeness and fragmentation create a sort of pseudo-continuity in the lyric sonnet sequence. In the second half of the octave, there appears such a switch of focus. The narrating *I* goes on to explain why his present self has been narrated in this way, by explaining his critics' conception of his past self: "They say it happened because . . ." (McKay, "11" 5). However, his explanation is closely connected to group suffering. He is attacked because "I had the nerve" to stand up for the interest of others (emphasis added) (5). Again, McKay simultaneously addresses the misconceptions that have led to his misreading and the interests of those he would propose to save through his unique brand of egoism, which can be explained as both self-affirming and transcendent.

The sestet begins with the present tense, repeating the introduction to the sonnet in the persona of his detractors: "They say . . ." (9). This refrain acts as a transition from octave and sestet and serves as a bridge, created through tension, to the speaker's appropriation of the commentary. It is at this line that the speaker's awareness of his own poesis becomes distinct. The narrating *I* interrupts what would logically follow as the narration of the future *I* because the speaker cannot accept the analysis that is offered of past and present. "But before I would" is a semantical statement that momentarily halts the syntactic sense of the entire line (11). However, the connotative meaning of this phrase is not completely dissimilar from the grammatical sense upon the line's completion. McKay will not let what "they say" about his past or his present dictate what "I would" say about his future (9,11) He would ". . . rather clean the sewers of New York, / And be washed up against a long cold bar" (12-13). Ironically, his vision of an

alternative future for himself is similar to what his critics would propose for him.

However, this exile proves more favorable because the poet himself institutes it.

Self-imposed exile resurfaces as a topic of discussion in many of the sonnets to follow. This exile is closely related to what McKay considers the burden of double-consciousness, which he vehemently rejects. Barbara Griffin notes that while scholars such as George Kent propose that “McKay’s self-affirming Jamaican background acted as a buffer against the double-consciousness of which Du Bois spoke,” she believes that McKay “was deeply tormented by the dilemma of race” (50). While I partly agree with Griffin’s assertion, I believe that the dilemma of which she speaks is not that of race but of autonomy. It is easy to understand why Griffin would label this as a condition of race consciousness because his autonomy is questioned based on the precincts of race. Therefore, McKay uses the authorial *I* throughout the cycle as a testament against marginalization based on race.

While double-consciousness may, in fact, be a real phenomenon, McKay suggests that it does not have dictate how an artist or any man perceives himself. The only eye that matters is the one through which the speaker himself narrates his own psychology. Whether or not we believe McKay when he asserts, for example, that “If We Must Die” expressed a mass sentiment instead of a direct reaction to ongoing race riots, it is more important to question our own motives for insisting that it must be the latter. “Cycle 18,” which introduces a McKay removed from the concerns of the world in which he lives, demonstrates this very sentiment. Structurally, McKay gives the most attention to his present self, devoting thirteen of the fourteen lines to the present *I*. The first four lines

introduce the circumstance for his writing. While taking a walk, McKay says that he does not ask himself why a white person smiles at him. He is unconcerned with racial consciousness because his feet “[a]re busy like thousands in the usual style” (McKay, “18” 4).

The past *I* that is nestled between two present statements with future implications in lines 5-7 act as an affirmer of his present and future. The narrating *I* institutes authority over his future self: “I want not to find out” (5). Then the past confirms that he has “never been curious to know” (6). Therefore, the final statement in the octave is given further validity with that fact in mind: “Nor do I want to waste my time to figure / How many are anti-black, how many pro!” (7-8). The sestet marks the return of his focus to the opening lines of the sonnet. The imagery of the chip on the speaker’s shoulder in line 9 creates visual tension in the following line as he goes (burden free) “elbowing among the crowd” (9, 10). He does not feel any pressure to represent any abstract idea of decorum for those who may be focused on him as he walks with “naught” on his mind (14). McKay’s cognizance of others’ focus on him is important because it is not his intention to imply that whites who may be thinking such ills are not among the crowd. What concerns him is being in control of his own mind, not letting anyone else dictate to him what is on the mind of a black man as he walks through a crowded street where he is a minority. He is not bothered by these questions as he takes his “sidewalk jaunt[s]” because he sees himself as “a human being” (13, 14). In one of the few instances where McKay uses the second person to address an unknown “you,” he emphasizes the struggle to remain in control of his narrative and in turn his poesis: “. . . if you will let me” (13).

Therefore, the questions surrounding McKay motives behind writing “If We Must Die” reveals an interesting and keen insistence, even in the presence of contradictory evidence,¹⁵ to retain authorship over his work and his mind, which, as in this poem and the others I have discussed thus far, is achieved by the use of the authorial *I*.

Spiller proposes that “[e]very now and then the sequence is punctuated by a sonnet that reflects on the failure of poetry: one of the instabilities of the psyche is to doubt the value of speech in the act of speaking, and sonnet sequences in particular have the capacity to dramatize psychological instability as semiotic trauma” (The Sonnet 82). However, McKay resolves this phenomenon in his poems that directly discuss poesis. Because he does not ask for forgiveness but demands sovereignty over his words, the sonnet sequence represents the struggle of the speaker against forces that have created/narrated psychological instability when psychological stability has remained constant in his past and present. To quote an earlier cycle poem, “Cycle 37” McKay states,

So what I write is shot out of my blood.
There is no white man who can write my book,
Though many imagine they were ordained by God
To tell what colored people think and brook. (9-12)

Because white men have attempted to write McKay’s book they have narrated it incorrectly, and McKay, through the course of the cycle, rectifies these misnomers point by point.

¹⁵ See Note 18 in Barbara Griffin’s article, “The Last Word: Claude McKay’s Unpublished ‘Cycle Manuscript’”

It is not only whites that offer an obstacle to McKay's autonomy; blacks have also stood in his way, as expressed in "Cycle 47." In many ways, sonnet "47" solidifies the entire cycle, and it resonates with the proem. The sonnet directly discusses the authorial *I* as "subject and object of its own discourse" (Spiller, The Sonnet 105). Because McKay chooses to express himself on his own terms, not giving into racial propaganda or submission to the dominant culture's will, he is an outcast in both communities: "They hate me black and white, for I am never / Afraid to say exactly what I think" ("47" 1-2). In his radicalism, McKay marks his distance from the ideal that Black artisans must adhere to some abstract ideal of gentility and dignity in their writing as embraced by members of the Black intelligentsia and reformist groups. As noted by Wayne Cooper, "The rest [members of the NAACP], while applauding his poetry, remained wary of his militant radicalism" (16). The octave is dedicated to the present *I*, who emphasizes that the source of their hate is his artistic freedom, which is closely connected to a spiritual commitment to honesty.

Beginning with "I am", each successive *I* statement gains more force that is further punctuated by the repetition of "They hate me" in line 3, which then allows him to drop the introduction altogether and in line 5, simply stating "Because" (McKay, "47" 1, 3, 5). As in "Cycle 18," his discussion of poesis is always grounded in the discussion of some problem at hand. This poem seeks to expose the fallacy of the Talented Tenth: "The better Negroes cannot rise alone" (8). The present *I* is completely absent from the sestet. He uses the first four lines before the couplet to further explain the psychology of those who believe in this doctrine. McKay uses the same weapon that has been the

source of his pain; however, his censure is tempered by the religious overtones present in his imagery and the epigrammatic tone generated through the use of biblical syntax:

They who imagine they can save their soul
By thinking white and hating black will find
That in the end they cannot attain their goal;
For though they see, yet they are really blind. (9-12)

McKay scolds them for believing that their assimilation into the dominant culture will mean freedom and equity for all, when all it means is that they have forgotten who they are. McKay sees a need for community solidarity. This is the only way Blacks will ever truly be uplifted. McKay rejects both the white man's claim to superiority and Black elites' tactics to combat the oppression that is endured as a result. In the concluding couplet, McKay uses "We" to express a mass sentiment that serves to intercept any criticism that he is another false savior of his people. By changing *I* to *we*, he declares that although he has a keen insight into these matters, he also needs salvation and that salvation will come with his brethren or they will all "be kept down as slaves" (14).

In a distinctively prophetic voice, McKay summarizes in "51" what he believes to be the battle between good and evil. The powerful and wealthy are blasphemous because they act as gods, drawing their authority from those who have no authority: "Can the blind lead the blind?" ("51" 7). McKay's resolve to continue his truthful observations of the world around him comes from his connection to Christ. What he has discovered in his time has gone on for centuries. Therefore, he feels humbled and comforted by the story of Jesus and the Christian doctrines that are produced as a result. Like Christ,

McKay will be “scourged with rods” and die so that his people “might be free / Of men who pose as Gods to rule mankind” (3-5). However, McKay’s service to his people doesn’t put him in the same self-righteous position of these men, because he has submitted to the will of God: “My pagan life of arrogance and dross, / I lay down humbly at the foot of your cross” (13-14). What McKay also lays down at the cross, in what proves to be the best sonnet in the later part of the sequence and the conclusion to the motif of the authorial *I*, is his pen. The narrating or authorial *I* has simultaneously righted the wrongs done against him while working in the service of a higher power whose concerns transcend the physical world of pagan idolatry, which ironically includes a selfish preoccupation with personal sorrow. This theme is developed further in the poems McKay would write in his *Final Catholic Poetry*, pointing again to the overarching sequence that runs throughout his entire body of poetry. Beginning with “The Pagan Isms,” McKay steers away from his own hurt and embraces the doctrine of self-denial, giving approbation of his story to God and therefore moving from a rhetorical and historical wholeness achieved by the presence of a narrating *I* to a spiritual wholeness that the narrating *I* seeks to comprehend. *The Cycle* (c. 1943) marks McKay’s move forward, a development that is only made possible by a distinctive and earnest understanding of *I*.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

*I prefer the Catholic Church and its symbolic interpretation of the reality of Christ Crucified¹⁶
I am not the less a fighter¹⁷*

In exploring the “*The Cycle*,” *Circa 1943* we are able to see that McKay aptly appropriates the lyric sonnet sequence to his own life and cleverly uses the position of the narrating *I* in that tradition to speak directly to his critics. More important than his reprisal of his critics is a sincere move to be understood by his people. He devotes many lines to his opinions on Black education, communism, fascism, entertainment, sharing a kinship with other oppressed groups, and U.S. conflicts in other countries. As varied as these issues are, they all have one common thread. McKay has claimed the right to express his feelings on these issues, regardless of censure from the black or white community. His social commentaries are an act of self-preservation. However, he constantly checks his own claim to authority by exposing the irreverent claims of others.

Ironically, by judging, he exposes himself to judgment. McKay, however, welcomes judgment because that judgment does not come from those who pose as gods, but from God himself. In “Cycle 51” McKay summarizes his unique position as a poet who can expose evils but who is not altogether immune to its vices. In a distinctively prophetic voice, McKay describes what he believes to be the battle between good and evil. This prophetic voice is further highlighted by starting the sonnet *in medias res*, adding to the story-like tone of the speaker’s address. He begins the first line with a

¹⁶ “To Max Eastman,” 16 Oct. 1944. Cooper 305.

¹⁷ Ibid.

pyrrhic (“Whén thề”) in order to give the reader, however vague, a place of reference—to mark the beginning without actually having a beginning (McKay, “51” 1). This works thematically as well, as there is no point of reference for “[w]hen the dictators set them up as Gods” (1). This idea is repeated in the next line in which the speaker discusses “the riddle of wealth and poverty,” which also has no referential point or answer (2).

McKay uses this sense of uncertainty to make a strong statement regarding authority. The powerful and wealthy are blasphemous because they act as gods, drawing their authority from those who have no authority: “Can the blind lead the blind?” (7). Therefore, the men who pose as Gods are incapable of any definition or conclusion because they are at just as much of a loss as those they would propose to lead. McKay’s resolve to continue his truthful observations of the world around him comes from his connection to Christ. Like Christ, McKay will be “scourged with rods” and die so that his people “might be free / Of men who pose as Gods to rule mankind” (3-5). However, McKay’s submission to God prevents him from falling into the same trap as these men: “My pagan life of arrogance and dross, / I lay down humbly at the foot of your cross” (13-14). This concluding couplet is essential to understanding the unique space that McKay wishes to occupy throughout the course of *The Cycle* (c. 1943).

Several layers must be uncovered in order to read the unity present in a work that seeks to be spiritually, politically, socially, and artistically viable. A large part of deciphering that unity deals with the various personas that McKay presents to us. While each is distinct, they are also all connected by the narrating *I*. The connection between the poet and God is supported by a long-standing literary tradition that records this

relationship, particularly among the Romantics whom McKay shares a special kinship with and with Donne, who develops the tradition of the holy sonnet. As a figure in limbo, mortal but having access to heavenly knowledge, in the sonnets that follow the introductory poem, McKay takes us from the sacred to the secular, describing the reality of living on earth as a Black man who is also an artist.

Therefore, *The Cycle* (c. 1943) deals primarily with worldly concerns that are skillfully colored by spiritual consciousness. The presence of the narrating *I* in all its temporal forms does seem to point to an agenda on McKay's part that has social and political implications, but their presence also carries with it a sense of responsibility and honesty that is part of the process of confession and absolution. His life then becomes a testimony for his religious fervor. As the speaker in "51" proclaims, "I thought of Jesus and the Pagan world, . . . / And boldly the flag of Christian life unfurled" (6,8). What McKay has discovered in his time has gone on for centuries. Therefore, he feels humbled and comforted by the story of Jesus and the Christian doctrines that were produced as a result. Ideally "51" would have been the conclusion of *The Cycle* (c. 1943), had McKay ever edited the collection in the way he suggested to Eastman.¹⁸ This as the concluding poem would have, I think, better represented the cycle that McKay sets out to map in the introductory poem, concluding with a move away from the worldly concerns that characterizes a great deal of the collection and returning to issues of transcendence. However, I believe it safe to infer that ending with such a biting reprisal of Communists who have succeeded in prostituting Negro writers in "Cycle 53" demonstrates a

¹⁸See "Letter to Eastman," 10 April 1945. Claude McKay Manuscripts, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.

conscious effort on McKay's part to remain characteristically fierce. He cleverly frames his reprisal with religious imagery. Using an apocalyptic image in the sestet, McKay describes the hostile takeover of Communists who scatter their "stench and slime" everywhere ("53" 14). What he proves in the end is that he is "not the less a fighter," and having drawn his authority from God, McKay leaves little room for argument (Cooper 305).

Critics, however, have argued about this period in McKay's life, questioning whether his conversion to Catholicism was a departure from his former self. Like critics' insistence that there is a vexing conflict between content and form in McKay's sonnets, the same can be said about their assessment of McKay's later "Catholic" poetry in relation to his earlier works. However, as I demonstrated in the introduction to this thesis, McKay has always been continually moving toward some sort of artistically spiritual wholeness in his life and poetry. As Condit notes, "McKay's turn to Catholicism was too much a part of his life pattern to constitute either a compromise or a reversal," and as the poet himself explains, "I had always wanted to belong to a religion" (357; Cooper 305). What McKay has demonstrated through the narrative of his poetry is the growth and development of such a longing, which is acute in his revisions or rather re-visitations of earlier poems later in his life. The reflective ethos of *The Years Between* (1925-1934) set the stage for the "vicious" exploration of his life in *The Cycle* (c. 1943), and it is the spiritual overtones coupled with the authorial *I* in *The Cycle* (c. 1943) that foreshadow McKay's submission of selfhood in exchange for salvation, which paradoxically insures the spiritual self's preservation in Christian doctrine. Even his so-

called radical poetry logically prefaces these works. Wagner explains, “It [hatred as expressed in McKay’s most radical works] is but a stage on the path that ends in divine charity, for which its purifying action prepares the way” (235).

In the poems McKay wrote after he completed *The Cycle* (c. 1943) the speaker is altogether occupied with questions of maintaining spiritual fortitude in the midst of “pagan isms” that “roar” and “crash” (McKay, “The Pagan Isms” 1). “The Pagan Isms” is a revisitation of “The Cycle.” Many ideas introduced in this poem correspond to lines in the introduction to the sequence. More than simply calling into question the commitments to his previous statements, the poem serves as a metapoetic statement about the organic development of an artist over the course of his lifetime. Therefore, calling this a justification or a new turn in his life does not consider the process or journey, which is at the crux of understanding in art and spiritually. In McKay’s derision of evil, he includes himself more explicitly as a participant in those evils: “Around me roar and crash the pagan isms / To which most of my life was consecrate” (1-2). Here he admits to being a source of “the conditions which have hedged . . . [his] bitter way” (“The Cycle” 4). He has been seduced by schisms that seek to define him ideologically on one side or the other.

Instead, truth should be the source of his loyalties. As he stated in a letter to Eastman, “I am not a Marxist or Communist and never was one, but if Communists sometimes say the truth in spite of all their lies I am not going to say the truth is not the truth” (Cooper 312-313). He admits, however, that “old enthusiasms” haunt him, but it is his faith that sustains him (McKay, “The Pagan Isms” 7). In lines 10-11 of the sestet,

McKay makes his most decisive connection to “The Cycle.” It is not a coincidence that these lines may very well be the most poignant of this sonnet. In a very ominous tone, McKay goes to God to make peace, expressing a sense of mortality that is not implied in the very forward looking “But tomorrow” (“The Cycle” 9). Then, moving from physical bondage to spiritual bondage in “The Pagan Isms,” the speaker implies that mental oppression is the great obstacle to his religious elevation because the mind, not the body, is most significant: “And so to God I go to make my peace / Where black nor white can follow to betray” (“The Pagan Isms” 9-10).

“The Cycle” (c. 1943) gives us invaluable insight into McKay the artist and McKay the man. In many ways, Griffin is correct in her assessment of the work, calling it “a testament to McKay’s old intellectual past” (43). However, more than simple recollection or diatribe, the work demonstrates a social and religious maturity that had always been present in his work waiting to be manifested in a way only a sonnet sequence can adequately handle. The metapoetic qualities of this genre also provide insight into McKay’s commitments to the tradition of the sequence as a whole and the sonnet form individually because while the sequence works to hold the poems together, each has to carry with it its own significance. Because McKay understands the history and tradition of the form, he is able to deviate from some of those tropes while maintaining its integrity. His favorite devices are by far end-stopping at the end of important phrases to mark the end of a sentence, as well as signifying line and stanza divisions. McKay even playfully extends the iambic pentameter into the 11 syllables initiated by Italian sonneteers.

In assessing his sonnet math, we can see that McKay explores the idea of freedom gained in the midst of restriction. The fourteen lines are given new life in the hands of this Harlem Renaissance sonneteer because he understands, through his religious conversion, the power of submitting to a will outside himself. McKay instructs us on how the rigidity of the sonnet form can be liberating, a task pursued by many who would call themselves sonneteers but few actually achieve with the same ease and ingenuity as McKay. In mapping *The Cycle* (c. 1943), we are mapping the sequence, if you will, that runs through McKay's entire body of poetry. Reading his poems as such, gives us, in the tiny room of the sonnet, a place to go for tradition, autonomy, and spirituality as only an emotional, sensitive, but consistently fierce poet can provide.

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